

Major Josiah Coffin House
60 Cliff Road
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-911

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10-NANT
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

MAJOR JOSIAH COFFIN HOUSE

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Location: 60 Cliff Road (on North Liberty Street at southwest corner of Cliff Road, formerly North Street), Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Mrs. Isabelle Hollister Tuttle (Mrs. Emerson Tuttle)

Present Occupant: Mrs. Tuttle

Present Use: Summer occupancy

Brief Statement of Significance: A large two-story lean-to style, it is one of the oldest houses on Nantucket.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

- 1724 -- Major Josiah Coffin built house for his son, Josiah Coffin, Esquire.
- 1756 -- Josiah Coffin. Major Coffin deeded to his son "a tract of land on which my said son's house now stands."
- 1811 -- Josiah Coffin, Esquire, died in 1811, leaving the property to his third wife, Elizabeth, and after her death to be divided among his heirs. Elizabeth Coffin died in 1822.
- 1823 -- Benjamin Gardner, one of the heirs of Josiah Coffin, Esquire, bought the property from the other heirs.
- 1854 -- Josiah C. Gardner bought the house and land at public auction from Judith Gardner, Administrator of the Estate of Benjamin Gardner.
- 1890 -- Eunice C. Brooks inherited from her father, Josiah C. Gardner.
- 1924 -- Herbert Gardner bought from heirs of Eunice C. Brooks.
- 1925 -- to date -- Isabelle Hollister Tuttle purchased the property. (Abstract, Records in Registry of Deeds, Nantucket, Massachusetts.)

2. Date of erection: 1724. The house faces south without reference to the nearest road, which is characteristic of early houses.

Some years ago Professor Henry Mitchell by a novel method investigated the age of the Josiah Coffin House. He assumed

that it was placed north and south according to the indication of the needle of a mariner's compass; but the direction of the needle varies through an arc of the circle backwards and forwards a certain number of degrees according to laws well known to scientific engineers. His computation fixed the year 1723 as the date when the east and west sides of that house coincided with the magnetic north. Then he called on the elderly lady who owned the property and told her he estimated the age of the house by reference to the mariner's compass, and wished to ascertain how near correct was his conclusion. It was found that his computation had reached the year before the house was built, which was a successful estimate. (Abstract, Early Houses At Nantucket by Worth)

3. Architect: None.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: No plans known. Originally constructed much as it presently appears with two stories and lean-to across the north side.
5. Alterations and additions: When Mrs. Tuttle bought the house in 1925 the various rooms were restored to their original proportions and all necessary modern improvements and additions were added with consideration for the original structure. The east front room has been restored in detail.

A fireplace was uncovered which had been bricked up years before, containing andirons, crane and kettles. In restoring the livingroom, or keepingroom, three successive openings were uncovered before the full original nine-foot-wide fireplace was finally revealed, with its smoke shelf and its fine herringbone brick fireback.

It has been ascertained that the double gable dormers on the rear (North) side of the house were built just before 1850. The present owner of the house, Mrs. Tuttle, states that people have told her that they or their parents knew of dormers as far back as 1850. This was in 1924 when she and her husband first purchased the house. Also, she says she has seen photographs of the house with these dormers dating from around 1880.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: Major Josiah Coffin won his commission through service in the French and Indian Wars when members of privateers threatened the coast.

The period in which the house was constructed was during the moving of the town from Capaum to Wesco. The harbor at Capaum had become too small for the growing town of Sherburne and the Islanders were taking up their new residences near the "great harbor," as the present harbor was then called. Some houses had been built in this new location as early as 1680, of which the "Oldest House" is an example, but most of the dwellings were built

about 1720. It is remarkable that so many houses of this period have survived on Nantucket.

Major Josiah Coffin was the son of Mary (Gardner) and Jethro Coffin, who owned and lived in the Jethro Coffin House. Jethro died in 1726 and his widow left her home and came to live for forty-one years with her son, Josiah, and his wife in this home.

Major Josiah Coffin's son, Josiah, was usually spoken of as Josiah Coffin, Esquire, possibly because he was Town and County Treasurer at Nantucket. Benjamin Gardner, who owned the house in 1823, was always called "Squire Ben."

Mrs. Lewis L. Edgarton relates that her father, John B. Coffin, remembered Thanksgiving in this house when as many as thirty cousins sat down to dinner.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: One exterior and two interior views, Ladies Home Journal, May, 1955; old view in One Hundred and Six Views of Nantucket by John Henry Robinson, Washington, D. C.: Judd and Detweiler, 1911; old photograph in Nantucket Lands and Land Owners by Worth.

2. Bibliography:

Fowlkes, George Allen. A Mirror of Nantucket, an Architectural History of the Island, 1686-1850.
New Jersey: Press of Interstate, 1959.

Worth, Henry Barnard. Early Houses at Nantucket.
Nantucket: Nantucket Historical Association
Proceedings, 1904, p. 19-24.

Worth, Henry Barnard. Nantucket Lands and Land Owners.
Nantucket: Nantucket Historical Association Bulletin,
Vol. 2, No. 1 & 7, 1904.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin
Nantucket, Massachusetts
November, 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This house is one of the oldest houses on Nantucket and a fine example of the salt-box or lean-to house.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions:
 - a. House: 30' - 10" by 38' - 5 1/2".
 - b. Appendage: 24' - 3 3/4" by 31' - 8 1/2".
2. Foundations: Fieldstone and sand with sills on grade.
3. Wall construction: Weathered cedar shingles, 5" average exposure, nailed over horizontal sheathing, corner boards and trim painted grey-green, "coffin" red (Indian red) at eaves and screens.
4. Structural system: Post and lintel system with sills, posts, girts, summer beams and plates; summer beams perpendicular to long dimension of house; gun-stock posts serve as some vertical members; mortise and tenon construction, treenail and iron fasteners; roof in five bays.
5. Stoops: Large pieces of fieldstone at front stoop, paved area at west side of appendage.
6. Chimney: T-shaped central chimney has stepped face on south elevation, five flues, brick construction, corbelled necking and heavy corbelled cap.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: South (front) doorway has simple plank frame, five-light fixed overdoor, vertical board door; north doorway has simple board trim, vertical board door with twelve lights; door in west elevation of ell is of vertical boards.
 - b. Windows: Plank frames, mortise and tenon construction, dowel fasteners, twelve-over-twelve single hung eaves predominate; some six-over-six single hung windows appear to be of early construction; miscellaneous modern four-over-six, three-over-three and six-light casements.
8. Roof: Salt-box or lean-to roof on house, gable roof on appendage; asbestos shingle covering on boards paralleling roof slope and nailed to purlins between rafters; scuttle and skylight in north slope of house roof; bracketed cornice at south eave, console brackets appear to be non-structural and are spaced to accommodate window openings which project into cornice fascia, wood gutters and metal leaders, boxed downspouts; simple board cornices and barge boards elsewhere; two dormers in north slope have gable roofs, two eight-over-eight single hung windows each, shingle sides,

horizontal board pediments; modern shed dormer in west slope of appendage roof.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Circular butter cellar, accessible by ladder from room in northwest side of lean-to.
- b. First floor: Entry and stairhall opens into parlor (diningroom) at southwest corner and to the keeping room (livingroom) to the southeast, central fireplace-chimney core; old kitchen and three smaller rooms in lean-to, staircase to second floor spaces in lean-to and access to four rooms in appendage. (The appendage is extensively reworked from earlier summer kitchen.)
- c. Second floor: Front (south) stairhall to two chambers (bedrooms), three rooms (bedroom and two baths) and stairhall in lean-to; two rooms and stair in appendage.
- d. Third floor: Front stairway continues to several finished spaces in garret.

2. Stairways:

- a. Front staircase is U-shaped with winders, continues to attic spaces, rope handrail.
- b. Staircase in lean-to is L-shaped with winders to second floor, ladder from first floor to cellar.
- c. Stairway in appendage is L-shaped with winders at landing.

3. Flooring: Wood boards of various widths, oiled, spatter pattern (grey and green on black), red, yellow ochre.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, board and batten walls; ceilings in major first floor spaces are plaster between joists and beams, plaster elsewhere.
5. Doorways and doors: Two- and four-panel doors, some with glazed inserts.
6. Special decorative features: Typical Nantucket trim noted for its simplicity with decoration limited to the articulation of structural system, board and batten patterns; beams and posts have chamfered edges, some beams are boxed with beaded edges; corner cabinet in parlor (diningroom) is semicircular in plan, classic trim consisting of reeded pilasters, molded arch with keystone, stepped soffit with dentil cornice, two panel door; bas-relief drawing of ship on door to basement, and on other paneling; mantels are in a ship's keel motif;

corner cabinets in second floor bedrooms.

7. Hardware: Most of the hardware is original wrought iron thumb latches with wood bars and keeps, H hinges with forged nails are painted black; brass pulls and butterfly hinges, wrought iron hooks.
8. Lighting: Electric, no central fixtures.
9. Heating:
 - a. Central fireplace and chimney core:
 1. Keeping room (livingroom) fireplace: Brick hearth, brick reveals and back, herringbone panel insert, recess and smoke ledge in back wall oak lintel, oven or keeping space at left reveal and rear wall.
 2. Parlor fireplace similar to keeping room fireplace with trammel rod and chain in place.
 3. Lean-to fireplace of brick and cement surround, brick hearth.
 4. Fireplaces in Parlor Chamber and Hall Chamber are simple rectangular openings, brick hearths, backs and reveals; fireplace in second floor room in lean-to is of brick and cement mortar with no mantel or surround.
 - b. No modern heating system, dependent on fireplaces.

D. Site and Surroundings:

The Major Josiah Coffin House is located near the southwest corner of North Liberty Street and Cliff Road. The house faces south, brick walk to North Liberty Street edged with boxwood; peripheral planting at house; wood trellis for roses at west wall in fishbone pattern; outbuildings include artist's studio, playhouse (formerly a chicken house); well was located near southwest corner of house. Privet hedges at property line at both streets.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A.
Nantucket, Massachusetts
August, 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. They are part of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Truat.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects under the direction of Eugene George. Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. The architectural description was prepared by Profeasor F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A. (University of Florida). Photographs are by Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, August 1971.